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INFO RUEHDS/AMEMBASSY ADDIS ABABA PRIORITY 5816
RUEHDJ/AMEMBASSY DJIBOUTI 2727
RUEHLO/AMEMBASSY LONDON 1103
RUEHFR/AMEMBASSY PARIS 1269
RUEHUJA/AMEMBASSY ABUJA 0166
RUEHBS/USEU BRUSSELS
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SUBJECT: PATRIARCH'S DEPOSAL CONFIRMED

REF: ASMARA 131

CLASSIFIED BY: AMB Scott H. DeLisi, for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

11. (C) Eritrean Orthodox Church Administrator General Yofthahe Dimetros confirmed today the removal of Abune Antonios as the church's patriarch.(Reftel) According to the GSE-appointed Yofthahe, the Holy Synod voted to depose the Patriarch citing religious differences and claiming the Patriarch has "diverged from the faith." In Yofthahe's words, "it was the decision of the synod."

12. (C) Following the deposal, the synod selected Archbishop Dyoskoros to serve as convener, in essence to serve as the religious leader of the church. What happens next, is unclear. As the church is independent and completely separate from the Egyptian and Ethiopian churches, the Eritrean Orthodox Church has the authority to select its own leaders. Yofthahe explained "there is no need to get approval" from the Egyptian church for any decisions; the Holy Synod of the Eritrean church has the final say. Eventually, according to Yofthahe, the synod will select a new patriarch, yet he was unable or unwilling to explain how this will occur with the deposed Patriarch still alive and protesting the synod's decision.

13. (C) Presently the deposed Patriarch lives in a private home in Asmara. Diaspora websites report the home is surrounded by armed guards and that only a select few have access to him. In addition, the deposed Patriarch suffers from diabetes and there are concerns about his health and finances. While unable to lead services or serve in the church, Yofthahe explained the deposed Patriarch is free to pray and/or return to his monastery. Furthermore, he must now "repent and pray to be returned to the light."

14. (C) Yofthahe's comments about the reason for the removal of the Patriarch align with other reports heard by post. In conversations with PolOff, Yofthahe attempted to delineate between his role as the administrator and the religious affairs of the church, yet the deference payed to Yofthahe by others in the church and his travel to represent the church at religious gatherings overseas seem to indicate that he really is in charge. During a visa interview two weeks ago, a priest told PolOff that the patriarch was no longer the church head, Yofthahe was the leader.

¶5. (C) Comment: Yofthahe appears to be clearly in charge here in Eritrea and his dismissal of the role of the "mother church" in Egypt although confusing in terms of the traditional religious hierarchy, is fully consistent with the GSE's desire to limit outside influence/control of Eritrean institutions from whatever source. In this case, with the government's appointee now the unchallenged de facto leader of the Orthodox Church, the GSE's control over the single most important religious institution in the country seems to have solidified. End Comment.

DeLisi